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Public Versus Private Space

Laila El Baradei

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The final version, the version of record, is available online at:

<https://patimes.org/public-versus-private-space/>



Public Versus Private Space

A discussion started the other day with a young colleague about the progressively diminishing space left for public beaches in Egypt. Gradually the conversation led to an attempt to distinguish between what is public and what is private space, the role of government in maintaining a balance and the overall mission of governments. My take, simply, was that if government is serving citizens at large, there should be a reconsideration of what is public and available to all citizens, regardless of ability to pay. An accusation of living in a Utopian world ensued!

We realized that the distinction between the two terms ‘public space’ and ‘private space’ is not always clear. We use them in our everyday conversations to refer to many things—there are overlaps and oftentimes a lot of grey area.

Public space, when used by urban planners, refers to public parks, beaches and public areas that can be utilized by citizens at large at any time. The term private space is often used by individuals to refer to space restricted to their own use. On a wider scope, private space refers to personal property, owned by individuals, groups or corporations, so it includes their homes, land plots, etc. On a more limited scope, the term may be used by a teenage girl in debate with her parents when trying to control who enters her room.

The two terms are not antonyms, but there are debates about the degrees of publicness and the degrees of privacy. The distinction is not only related to ownership by the government and/or the nonprofit sector, versus ownership by private individuals, but are also related to the degree of accessibility. Questions are raised about the degree of publicness of toll charging high ways, or public higher education institutes asking for high tuition fees, accessible only to the select few who can afford to pay. On the reverse, citizens sometimes gravitate towards privately owned shopping malls, and find them more accessible.

The terms also have more complicated meanings when used to refer to citizens’ freedoms and rights. Bills of rights and constitutions afford protection to citizens’ privacy. However, reality on the ground is often different. The boundaries that a citizen may like to see kept around what constitutes private space for him or her, may not be always respected.

Invasion of privacy and private space, defined differently, may take many forms:

- *Hacking personal social media accounts and leaking personal photos of officials:* The latest case being the leaking of a video of the Finnish Prime Minister partying with friends, or a few months earlier a video of the British Prime Minister celebrating his birthday in office during the COVID-19 restrictions.
- *Physical or Verbal Harassment on the street:* Harassment of women on the streets of Egypt is the number one complaint by tourists.
- *Social media bugs and cookies:* Here again the concern is about the tons of data collected about users of social media, with and without their knowing, and how this data gets to be used; the least harmful use being for marketing purposes. We all tick off the Cookies Accept box when asked if we would like to proceed to reading an article or opening a webpage of interest. Seldom does anybody read the fine print before approving the use of cookies by whomever asks for it.
- *Artificial intelligence, data mining and big data analysis:* It is not only about cookies on social media platforms, but collecting millions of data points about each citizen, mostly without his knowledge and then figuring out ways to use this data collected.
- *Nudging:* Trying to manipulate citizens behavior and decisions, through non-harmful tweaks to applications and choice menus, has an ambiguous ethical dimension, especially when citizens are not in the know.

- *Recordings of personal mobile phone conversations and airing them on public T.V.:* Egyptian T.V. had a weekly program entitled 'The Black Box' with the sole objective of defaming political opponents by airing recordings of personal mobile phone conversations, and recordings of personal conversations that occurred behind closed doors and were taped without permission.
- *Forced Evictions from homes, and sometimes cemeteries, for the sake of public benefit:* We have seen examples of that happening in Egypt in parallel to grand high way and investment projects. People may or may not be compensated later, but the point is they were kicked out of what they considered their private space.

Other overlaps may occur sometimes in the opposite direction, when private individuals invade government property:

- *Leaks of confidential documents:* Snowden, Wikileaks and other leaks have raised concerns about who has right of access to classified documents that discuss national and international governance issues.
- *Citizens illegally taking over public property:* The expansion of illegal housing in Egypt and other developed countries is a case in point. Here, private individuals encroach on public spaces and deny access to others.

The balance seems skewed between the public and private spaces in many parts of the world. Many of the decisions leading to the overlap between the two spheres need reconsideration.